

York
THOUGHTS

ON

5.
CHRISTIAN COMMUNION,

ADDRESSED TO

PROFESSORS OF RELIGION

OF EVERY

DENOMINATION.

SECOND EDITION, ENLARGED.

By JOHN FAWCETT, JUN.
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Omnium societatum nulla præstantior est, nulla firmitior, quam cum viri boni,
moribus similes, sunt familiaritate conjuncti. CICERO.

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CHRISTIAN COMMUNION

Considered and recommended.

THE Author of our being has implanted in us a strong inclination for society. Man partakes of this inclination in common with the brutal creation, but his capacities and powers for the enjoyment of it are much superior.

It is more necessary to his happiness, than to that of any other order of created beings with which we are acquainted. He is possessed of a soul capable of the highest cultivation. He is endowed with intellectual powers, which evidently shew that he was designed to associate with his kind, for the most important purposes. Without society this world, even as it was seen by our first parent in paradise, would be but a wilderness. We depend for most of the comforts of life upon one another. The high, the low, the rich and the poor, all feel the necessity of social connections.

But, though this disposition may be productive of good, we must allow, that, through the depravity of human nature, it has been the cause of much

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evil. It is an awful truth, that the natural propensity of mankind is to wickedness, and that, instead of encouraging one another in what is good, they generally harden one another in their crimes. If we follow the multitude, it will be "to do evil." The history of the world, whether in its barbarous or more civilized state, is but too great a confirmation of this lamentable truth.

There is much communion amongst men. Multitudes are crowding together in the downward road. They unite in bodies, according to the different vices to which they are most addicted. *Here* you see the man of pleasure, surrounded by the jovial throng; he spares no pains to form an assemblage of such persons as suit his disposition. *There* you see the man who values riches above all other objects, eager to unite with those from whom he is likely to gain some advantage, and quite happy when he thinks he has formed a good connection. But if you turn your eyes to the professors of religion in general, you will see few of those strong indications of pleasure and satisfaction, in each other's company which you observe in the former, and little of that eager desire to communicate their sentiments. Christians live too much like strangers to one another. The children of this world are in this, as in many other respects, wiser than



than the children of light. They certainly act more consistently.

These and other circumstances, that might be mentioned, render the subject proposed for our present consideration very important. Christian Communion is not valued or improved as it ought to be. We therefore call for your serious attention, while we endeavour *to point out your obligations to this duty—to enumerate some of the advantages of it—and to suggest some means of promoting it.* God grant that a blessing may accompany our feeble efforts!

Our *obligations* to this duty will appear, if we consider, that it is the tendency of religion in general, and of Christianity in particular, to promote communion.

Under the different dispensations in which God has revealed himself, religion has always induced its professors to withdraw from the unbelieving world, and to unite with each other. Even when society was in its infancy, and many reasons might have rendered it desirable for all to associate together, it appears that the religious posterity of *Seth* had little or no connection with the profligate descendants of *Cain*. They are styled, in scripture, the sons of God, and they, as such, enjoyed communion with him and with one another.

Abraham, the father of the faithful, at the divine command, left his native place and went to a distant land, that he might not be contaminated by the vices of his forefathers. The Almighty fixed upon his descendants as his peculiar people, among whom the true religion should be preserved till the coming of the Messiah. They were required to assemble frequently for religious purposes; and the book of Psalms evidently shews, that there was not only fervent piety towards God, but intimate communion amongst good men, under that dispensation. The daily oblations, the observance of the sabbath, and the frequent journies they took together to Jerusalem, must have tended to promote social religion. As a nation, it is true, they often apostatized from God, yet, in the darkest periods, there were some among them who feared him, and spake often one to another. Sentiments of piety united those together who were influenced by them. When Naomi, having no expectation that her daughter-in-law would go with her, was about to take leave of her, Ruth, with all that fervor which true piety alone can inspire, said: "Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." David, in his de-

devout compositions, frequently expresses the satisfaction he felt in the society of good men: "I am a companion of all them that fear thee, and that keep thy statutes."

But though, in reading the Old Testament, we shall find many intimations, that good men in those early ages held communion with each other, we must observe that christianity, which was designed to be more generally diffused in the world, has a more particular tendency to promote it.

Whether we consider the nature of the doctrines of christianity—the example of its Founder—the spirit and disposition it inspires, or the duties it enjoins, it will appear to be admirably calculated to answer this end.

Such is the nature of the gospel, that, when rightly understood, it must cause the mind to expand in generous feelings, and in good-will to mankind. Here we behold the most wonderful display of disinterested, unmerited love, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son."—Can you, brethren, consider this passage, and not feel the force of the apostle's appeal? "If God so loved us, we ought also to love one another." Were salvation obtained by our own righteousness, some might, in the persuasion of the superiority of their own attainments, look down

with contempt upon their fellow-creatures, and say, Stand by, we are holier than you. But boasting is here excluded : we are all guilty before God ; and if we are saved, it must be by grace alone.

Love enters into the spirit of christianity, and the more you contemplate its nature, the more you will feel of that divine principle, both towards God and your fellow-christians. The wisdom which cometh from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.

Review the conduct of our divine Master, and you will find that he exemplified and enforced social religion. Though he was the Son of God, and declared himself positively to be so, he did not disdain to call us, worms of the dust, his brethren. He did not command his attendants to keep at an humble distance; we see nothing morose or reserved in his character and deportment. He did not, like John the Baptist, retire into the wilderness. He associated familiarly with mankind.—Multitudes flocked to him wherever he came: but, besides his occasional hearers, there were some who had relinquished their former pursuits, for the purpose of intercourse with him and each other. They followed him, as his companions, wherever he went. After he had retired from the crowd,

we frequently find him conversing with them, and explaining his parables to them. He bore with their simplicity; he answered their inquiries with the greatest readiness, and shewed, on all occasions, the most affectionate regard for them.—Through the whole course of his public life, and particularly at the close of it, when he delivered his farewell discourses, he exemplified that kind disposition which we ought to feel for each other. He hath left us an example of christian communion.

The new commandment which he gave to his disciples, and to all his followers, was, “that they should love one another,” and in this is certainly included the communion of christians. What is communion, but the expression of this love? Wherever love exists, it will evidence itself in this way. That same command, therefore, on which Christ laid so much stress, which teaches us to love our brother, equally requires us to maintain communion with him.

We might remind you of many other duties which Christ inculcated, all which tend to promote communion. What are the dispositions of mind particularly necessary to it? Is it necessary to lay aside anger, wrath, malice, bitterness? These are positively prohibited by the Christian Lawgiver.

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Is it necessary to cultivate a forgiving spirit—humility, meekness, disinterestedness? These dispositions Christ required of his followers, and was himself a most bright example of them. So much do they enter into the spirit of christianity, that to put them on is to put on Christ. In our prayers we are commanded to say *Our Father*, to teach us, that we ought to be concerned not only for ourselves, but for others. If the disciples on any occasion manifested an unfociable, selfish disposition, he reproved them for it, and shewed them the impropriety of their conduct, as his followers. He assured them, that, in order to be truly great, they must shew acts of kindness and condescension, and not disdain the meanest offices. When *Peter* put the inquiry to him, “How often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him, until seven times?” Christ says unto him, “Not until seven times, but until seventy times seven.” Sometimes he warns them not to give offence to the least of those who believed on him. These circumstances, if properly considered, shew how essentially communion enters into the spirit of the christian religion. Of such importance are these social tempers, that, without them, we give no sufficient evidence of our being the real followers of the meek, the lowly, the compassionate Jesus. By
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this, he says, "shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye love one another."

As the nature of christianity gradually disclosed itself, its tendency to promote the disposition we are now speaking of appeared more and more.

The distinction between Jews and Gentiles, which had been very great, subsided; it was declared, that he that feareth God, of every nation, is accepted of him. The veil of separation was now rent in twain. In Christ Jesus all have access by one Spirit to the Father. Though once strangers and foreigners, they are now fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God.

The relation, in consequence, subsisting between christians, implies the closest connection, and sets forth our obligations to cultivate christian communion. However they may have differed in other respects, they now become brethren; it is their duty and privilege to act to each other as such. If Christ is the vine, they are the branches, joined to him and to each other. If he is the corner-stone, they individually belong to the same building, and ought to be cemented one to another. They are, to use a stronger figure, members of the same body, of which Christ is the head. There ought, therefore, to be a fellow-feeling, since if one member suffer, all the members suffer with it.

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There is a kind of fellowship between all real christians,—a fellowship of interests, of comforts, of privileges, and duties. They are partakers of the same hope of the gospel, and of the same common salvation; objects of the same love, renewed by the same spirit, heirs of the same promises, adopted into the same family; they are, in short, all one in Christ.—What are the ideas, brethren, that we ought to affix to these terms, which are so frequently made use of by the inspired writers, when describing the disciples of Christ? Are not these strong expressions designed to set forth that communion which should not only subsist between them and Christ, but between one another?

The apostles of Christ, who had every opportunity of studying the spirit of christianity, and the example of their divine Master, were equally solicitous to promote the same disposition.

They did not satisfy themselves with preaching the word to all that came to hear, but, wherever they laboured with success, they established religious societies for the edification of the new converts. Over these they watched with the tenderest care, and particularly explained to them their duties to each other. For a proof of this we need but refer you to the epistles they wrote to the infant-churches. Never were the duties of christians

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to each other more beautifully set forth than in these writings of the apostles. By the love of God, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ, by a regard for the divine honour, and the prosperity of the church, exhortations to unity are enforced.

The apostle *Paul*, who was taught the nature of the gospel by a special revelation from heaven, breathes, throughout his epistles, the spirit of christian communion. Scarcely can we open any part of them, but we must perceive that tender concern for those to whom he writes, which is the result of this amiable spirit. He begins and ends his letters with the most affectionate salutations. Frequently does he express the most ardent desire to see them, that, says he, I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, that ye may be edified. He assures them, that he was deeply interested in their welfare, that he was willing to live or to die with them, that their afflictions were his own, and that his joy was the joy of them all. He was not only desirous to have fellowship with those among whom he was present, but to maintain it with his distant friends, by writing letters to them, and receiving their answers. Whatever subject he has been discussing in the former part of these epistles, he uniformly gives them; towards the close, directions relating to their conduct to each other. He ex-
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horts them to walk in love as Christ hath loved them; to be attentive not only to their own interests, but to those of others; to forbearance with the weak and ignorant; not to please themselves; to participate in the afflictions and comforts of others; to weep with those that weep, and to rejoice with those that rejoice; to avoid contentions and disputes, keeping the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. But to enumerate all the passages that might be adduced to this purpose, would be to transcribe a considerable part of the epistles themselves. In this respect the different writers all agree. The epistles of *Peter*, and of *John*, the beloved disciple, all breathe the same spirit, and all conduce to the same end. Had we no other evidence of the tendency of christianity to promote communion, these epistles are more than sufficient.

In the history of the primitive church, we shall see the best comment on the exhortations with which the New Testament abounds. From the short account given us in the Acts of the Apostles, as well as from the epistles, it is evident that christians, in those early ages, were most intimately united together. They not only attended the public assemblies, but, as the sacred historian informs us, they continued stedfast in the apostles' doctrine, and in fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayer.

prayer. It appears that though many of the converts had come to Jerusalem from remote parts, and would otherwise soon have returned, they continued there a considerable time, not only that they might hear the word, but enjoy the fellowship of believers. The sweetest harmony reigned amongst them. They were united in the pursuit of divine truth. "One heart and one soul animated the whole multitude of them that believed." O happy society! How pleasant, how delightful the communion of saints, while they thus walked in the fear of the Lord, in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, and were edified.

Neither the ridicule of the world, nor the violence of persecution, could induce them to relinquish that fellowship which was so dear to them. Whether they were dismissed from the tribunal, or miraculously released out of prison, they immediately went to their own company, whom they generally found praying for them.—They not only met on the first day of the week, but, for some time at least, they united every day in the acts of communion. They were daily in the temple, probably in some retired part of it, where they assembled to offer up prayers and supplications to the Almighty. The multitude of them that believed were together, and engaged in the exercises of re-

ligion with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God.

The fellowship of primitive christians extended to a participation not only of spiritual but of temporal blessings. They sold their possessions, and laid the money at the apostles' feet, that it might be at their disposal. Their minds were so much taken up with religion, and the fellowship of christians, that they were willing to forego any attention to their secular affairs and worldly interests. They went from house to house, as convenience suited, and, no doubt, their common repasts were seasoned with the most edifying conversation. The frequency of the administration of the Lord's supper tended greatly to diffuse harmony and friendship among them. This ordinance was sometimes followed by their feasts of charity, which seem to have been principally designed to promote a sociable disposition among christians. At the conclusion of the public meetings, they testified their love to each other, by collections for the poor saints in their own society, and in other places. Such was the conduct of the professors of our holy religion in primitive times. Among the virtues which distinguished them, there were none for which they were more remarkable than their regard for each other, whether present or absent, and the unaffected simplicity of their conduct.

From what has been said, we may certainly infer, that the communion of saints is of divine institution; that as it is a principle implanted in our nature, to associate with our fellow-creatures, christianity is so far from repressing these feelings, that it refines and exalts them: this appears from the nature of its doctrines, the example of its Author, the duties it requires, the general exhortations of the apostles, and the lives of the primitive christians.

Were it necessary to produce further proofs of this, we might observe, that, in giving up ourselves to the church of Christ, we lay ourselves under obligations to maintain christian communion.—Many persons are apt to think, that if they join a society of christians, attend the ministry of the word, and partake of the ordinances, they do all that is necessary. These they do merely to silence the upbraidings of their consciences; they have no due sense of the importance of the fellowship of saints. But was this the spirit of primitive christians? Does our Saviour call for nothing more at our hands, as his professing followers? Are there no social duties incumbent upon us? We leave you to answer these inquiries, after having considered what has been before suggested. It is true, one important end of church-fellowship is, that we may unitedly partake of the ordinances;

but we ought to remember that they are but means. The principal design is, that, as heirs of the same promises, we may promote one another's welfare; we engage, as occasion may require, to instruct, to warn, to comfort each other. Conscious of our own personal weakness and inability to resist our spiritual enemies, we unite together for mutual assistance. Such a spirit *has* manifested itself in the church of Christ, but, alas! how little of it appears at present. May not the inquiry be justly put to many professors of christianity, "What do ye more than others?"—As members of a christian society, do we cultivate a fellow-feeling for each other? Do we warn, reprove, and exhort with all long-suffering? Do we feel a particular interest in the welfare of those to whom we are united? Do we weep with them in their distresses, as well as rejoice with them in their consolations? Would to God that more of this disposition were evident!

We might likewise observe, that, as members of religious societies, it is incumbent on us to exercise those talents which God has given us. "As every man has received the gift, so let him minister." Christian communion calls forth these talents into exercise, and no man, however inconsiderable his abilities, ought to plead an excuse. As in the human body the members have different offices,
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some more honourable, others of an inferior nature ; so in the church, which is the body of Christ, every member is required to promote the welfare of the rest. If the members of the body be inactive, and refuse to exert themselves, the vital frame decays : so, likewise, if there be no exertion amongst the followers of Christ, the mystical body, the church, languishes.

Finally, as an expression of love to Christ, you are required thus to shew your regard for the saints, by communion with them. Were the blessed Redeemer to make his appearance upon earth, as he once did, how would you manifest your love to him ? Certainly, by personal attendance, and a desire after intercourse with him. Now, though Christ is not thus present with us in a bodily form, he is so by his church and people, who are his representatives. Whatever is done to them, he considers as done to himself. If therefore we have no desire after fellowship with them, as belonging to him, how can we prove that we have any real regard for him, or that we have communion with him ? If you love not your brother whom you have seen, how can you prove to yourselves or to others, that you love God whom you have not seen ?

When our blessed Lord is giving an account of the process of the last day, he dwells particularly

past intercourse with mankind, may perhaps make you insensible of the benefits which may hence be derived. But, if the inquiry should be made, whether the advantages of it do not much more than counterbalance the difficulties attending it, we need not hesitate what answer ought to be given. The testimony of the church, in all past ages, has been a standing proof of its excellency. Many have considered communion with the saints, next to communion with God himself, the most desirable of all blessings.

Let us consider it as *a means of gaining religious knowledge*. Public worship is certainly of very great importance. But of those who attend the ministry of the word, how few are there who appear to be profited by it! They are ever learning, but never come to the saving knowledge of the truth. They do not give themselves the trouble to think about religion, with any application to their own consciences, much less do they make it the subject of conversation in their social hours. What they hear produces no permanent effect upon their minds, but passes away as a tale that is told. Is not this too true a description of many hearers of the word? and need we wonder that they have so little acquaintance, even in theory, with the truths of christianity?

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But to turn our attention to those who are beginning to be truly religious. Such persons have to struggle with many difficulties, especially if they have no serious acquaintances to encourage them, and to confirm their wavering purposes. As they are just emerging from the gloom of nature's darkness, all appears strange and mysterious to them. They discern a superior excellency in christianity, but their ideas, on many religious subjects, are confused and indistinct. Their situation resembles that of the Ethiopian eunuch, who had been at Jerusalem to worship, and was, as he travelled in his chariot, closely engaged in reading the scriptures, yet, when the question was put to him, Understandest thou what thou readest? his answer was, How can I understand except some one teach me?

Though God, in the conversion of a sinner, not only changes the heart, but also illuminates the mind, the progress of knowledge is gradual, and no proper means for the acquisition of it ought to be neglected. The divine promise is, "Then shall ye know, if ye follow on to know the Lord." In that beautiful description of repenting sinners, which you find, *Jer. l.* they are represented as asking the way to Zion, with their faces thitherward. *Asking the way* implies difficulty, and a consciousness of ignorance. They ask the way, there-

therefore, not only of the ministers of the word, but of others who are travelling in the same direction. Those who are farther advanced in the christian life ought to seek out persons, who are thus upon the inquiry about religion, to endeavour to gain their confidence and affection, to drop a word of encouragement to them, by insensible degrees to lead them on, and to explain to them the way of God more perfectly.

Christian conference is one of the best means of acquiring religious knowledge; the mind is thus brought into proper exercise, its powers are strengthened, and its conceptions enlarged. Those who at first gave very imperfect accounts of religion, by hearing the sentiments of others, and endeavouring to explain their own, begin to think more closely, and more clearly. They are thus enabled to give a reason of the hope that is in them with meekness and fear.

We would farther recommend *christian communion, as tending to promote the power of religion upon the mind.*

The communion of good men brings forth the graces of the Spirit into exercise. Under its auspicious influence, faith, hope, humility, and meekness grow exceedingly. As it is founded upon love, so it greatly increases it. We insensibly feel
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our hearts more and more united to those with whom we hold social intercourse. The mind is thus stimulated to greater exertions; a holy emulation takes place; zeal for God inflames the soul; resolutions for holiness are formed; spiritual comfort and a blessed hope are enjoyed. The weak are strengthened, the desponding cheered, and the enlivened christian brings forth fruit with patience. The truth of what the wise man asserts has often been experienced, that, "as iron sharpeneth iron, so the countenance of a man his friend." Such is the nature of divine truths, and such the convincing power of the word, that we cannot speak of them seriously, without feeling our souls animated by them. "Did not our hearts burn within us," said the disciples to each other, in recollecting the unexpected interview which they had with the Saviour, "while he talked with us by the way, and opened unto us the scriptures?" A similar effect has often been produced by communion with the followers of Christ. As in a lighted fire, though small at first, the flame communicates from one combustible to another, and the heat of each particular part is increased by those in contact with it; so, by christian communion, the flame of divine love spreads from one heart to another; those who unite in it catch the fire, whilst secluded
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christians, like scattered embers, scarcely retain any degree of warmth.

If christian communion be a duty of divine obligation, we cannot, in the neglect of it, expect that our souls will prosper; we shall be barren and unfruitful in the work of the Lord. Many promises of God, relative to growth in grace, and improvement in religion, can only be applicable to persons united in society with each other. "Where two or three meet in my name, there am I in the midst of them, to bless them." "They that be planted in the house of the Lord, shall flourish in the courts of our God." If christian communion be properly attended to, you will not only find your knowledge increased, but it will ripen into wisdom, and experience, and so be reduced to practice.— By comparing the effects divine truths produce on your own minds, with their operation on those of others, you will learn more of their nature and influence; you will get acquainted with the human heart, and thus, leaving the first principles, you will go on to perfection.

The influence of society, with respect to moral character, is evident wherever you cast your eyes. The man who keeps company with the notoriously wicked, either is so himself already, or will inevitably be contaminated with their vices; on the
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contrary, you cannot long unite with those who are eminent for humility, for piety towards God, and benevolence towards man, without admiring their excellencies, and desiring to be like them. In thus walking with wise men, you will yourselves become wise, while a companion of fools shall be destroyed.

No attainments in grace can render this communion unnecessary. As the young christian stands in need of it to acquire knowledge, and to gain experience, so it is equally necessary to the advanced christian, for maintaining that spirit which he has already imbibed, and improving those graces which have been formed in his soul. The best of men feel so much opposition from within and from without, that they want all the assistance that can be obtained, to answer this end. Christians are therefore frequently described as helpers of each other, and, if they are such, it must be in the discharge of those duties which imply fellowship and communion. While we thus endeavour to help others, we shall find in ourselves the beneficial effects of the attempt, and in watering others we shall also be watered ourselves. Acting under the influence of such a disposition, we shall, to use the energetic expression of the apostle, *Consider one another, to provoke unto love and to good works.*

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We shall not suffer one another to sink into a supine, negligent state of mind. As fellow-travelers to heaven, the more vigorous will encourage the feeble, and will help forward such as are fainting by the way. In thus associating together, we shall beguile the tedious hours in this waste-howling wilderness, forget the difficulties of the way, and reach at Zion's Hill.

But to extend our views on the subject still farther, we may consider christian communion as *affecting the interests of religion in general, as a preservative against infidelity, and as tending to produce a revival of religion in the world.*

We live in a period when many are apostatizing from the faith, and, with the greatest boldness, denying not only the circumstantial, but the essential truths of christianity. The love of many waxeth cold. The standard of infidelity is openly exalted against the cross of Christ. Are these times when christians should sit down at their ease, regardless of the common cause, and the common danger? Shall the disciples of Jesus spend their strength in unchristian-like disputes, when the enemy is endeavouring, by open hostilities, and secret machinations, to overthrow the whole system? God forbid that this should be the case. Should we not strive together for the faith of the

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gospel, and maintain close union with each other, that we be not like sheep scattered here and there without a shepherd! Certainly it becomes us not only to study the evidences of christianity, that we may be able to give a reason of the hope that is in us, but, for our own sakes, as well as to silence the cavils of infidels, to exemplify those tempers which christianity inspires.

The history of the church, through successive ages, awfully proves that religion has received its deepest wounds from the hands of its professed friends. It is enough to make us sit down and weep, when we reflect how often the church has been torn by internal dissensions, which have arisen about the most trifling matters; how often, on this account, the name of Christ has been blasphemed, and the cause of religion essentially injured! The most violent persecutions have been less prejudicial to christianity than the prevalence of such a disposition. When the infidel sees the professors of religion ready to bite and to devour each other, it confirms him in his aversion to religion itself; he infers, that their principles lead them to such a line of conduct. Do you wish, brethren, that this odium may be wiped away? Do you wish to put to silence the ignorance of foolish men? Do it, not only by the force of argument, but, by giving them

them a living proof of the superior excellence of christianity; shew them that it constrains you to love one another, and so to fulfil the law of Christ. Our blessed Lord, just before he took leave of his disciples, prayed, *that they all might be one*, one in affection, one in heart, *that the world*, says he, *may believe that thou hast sent me*; that, seeing the influence of christianity, they may be convinced of its truth and excellency. While we thus, in communion with each other, feel its power on the mind, we shall not be suffered to cherish uncomfortable doubts respecting its reality, having the witness in ourselves, and seeing its efficacy in others. The world at large will be constrained to confess, that God is with us of a truth.

We beg your particular attention, dear brethren, to this part of our subject. You may not have an opportunity of examining minutely the evidences of christianity; you may not be capable of comprehending all the arguments that might be adduced to prove its truth, but, if you suitably improve the light you enjoy, and endeavour to act conformably to the divine precepts, relating to your duty to God and your fellow-christians, you will have such a persuasion of the reality and excellency of our holy religion, as must satisfy the mind, and arm you against the efforts of the enemies of your
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faith. This is a kind of evidence which does not call for the aid of learning or eloquence. It is evidence that speaks to the heart; the shafts of ridicule, or the arts of sophistry, will make little impression on him who enjoys it. "Who shall harm you, if ye are thus followers of that which is good?"

Christianity met with great opposition when it was first propagated in the world. It had no temporal interest to support it. The teachers and professors of it were most of them plain, illiterate men. How did they silence the tongue of slander? How did they prove to the world its superior excellency? By the happy change it produced in them, and particularly by the proofs they gave of mutual affection. Their enemies were constrained to cry out, "Behold how these christians love one another!"

We lament the low state of religion amongst us, that the cause of Christ languishes in many places. We are ready to impute it to a variety of secondary causes. But are not we ourselves more implicated in the charge than we are ready to imagine? Is not the decay of christian communion amongst us one principal cause of it? When this communion is restored to its primitive simplicity, then, and not till then, may we hope to see a revival of religion.

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It is evident, that many professed christians attend one place of worship in preference to another, merely on account of what they hear from the pulpit; they have no attachment to the people themselves, and no desire to enjoy the benefits of communion with them. Need we to wonder, that, where this is the case, societies fluctuate, and often decline? If we feel no interest in a place, but because the minister pleases us, and are so little concerned about its prosperity, that we can leave it on slight occasions, the proper bond of union is wanting. We ought to manifest a disinterested concern for the welfare of Zion, more of the true spirit of christian communion, and, under the influence of it, we shall be stimulated, when affairs are discouraging, to be most constant in our attendance, most watchful over ourselves and others. It is particularly desirable, that those, whose experience and fervent piety qualify them for it, should exert themselves in this cause. It is the best, the most noble cause in which we can possibly engage. We address you seriously, as you value the interests of religion, and as you wish to see a revival of it in the world, dare not to neglect your duty. By social prayer, by affectionate exhortations, endeavour "to strengthen the things that remain, and are ready to die."

When the followers of Christ are scattered here and there, so that there is little or no connection between them, it cannot reasonably be expected, that their number should be increased. Zion then appears as though no man regarded her; she hangs her harp on the willows; she sits down disconsolate and forlorn; but when the spirit of christian communion is diffused, what encouragement is given to inquiring souls! They are constrained, while they behold your steadfastness and zeal, to say, "We will go with you, for we see that God is with you of a truth." Zion then travaileth, and bringeth forth children. Converts resort to the church, as doves to their windows. The accounts we have upon record, of remarkable revivals of religion in early and later periods, prove the truth of what is here asserted.

O God, where is thy zeal and thy strength? Wilt thou not appear for us as in former times? Wilt thou not revive us again, that thy people may rejoice in thee? Wilt thou not unite our hearts to each other, that we may be united to thee in a perpetual covenant, never to be forgotten?—Surely the vows of God are upon us; let us humble ourselves before him; let us supplicate him, that he would be pleased to heal all our backslidings, and increase our attachment to his cause, and our love to one another.

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Consider, further, the advantage of christian communion *in times of temptation*. The ways in which Satan tempts men are exceedingly diversified. Good men are sometimes tempted, through disbelief of what God has said, to gloominess and despondency of mind. It is the nature of temptations of this kind to prey upon the spirits, and to debilitate the mental powers; the danger is therefore greater of their gaining the ascendancy. Persons under the pressure of such painful sensations cannot summon up their powers. They are ready to despair of ever more seeing good in the land of the living, and to say, "My strength and my hope are perished from the Lord." At these seasons the christian can scarcely apply to himself the pathetic language of *David*, when in similar circumstances; "Why art thou cast down, O my soul, and why art thou disquieted within me, hope thou in God." He is not so able to judge of his own case as others; his mind is bewildered, it has lost its hold of heaven. How desirable, how necessary to him, thus deprived of the comfortable sense of God's presence, is the sympathetic condolence and tender attention of a friend, to remind him of his past experience, of the faithfulness of God, the promises of the gospel, the freeness and fulness of grace, to take up the impressive words of the Psalmist

Psalmist

Psalmist we before mentioned, and say unto him, 'Why art thou cast down, O christian, hope in God; whatever Satan may suggest, thou art still an object of the divine favour.—The Lord will command his loving-kindness in the day time.—Wait patiently for him, he will surely come, he will not tarry.'

The falls and backslidings of good men are awful proofs of the power of temptation, and of the necessity of christian communion. We shall generally find that these took place, either when they had voluntarily withdrawn themselves from the society of God's saints, or when they were, from particular circumstances, prevented the enjoyment of it. Satan tempted our mother *Eve*, when alone, to taste the forbidden fruit. Can we suppose that *David*, that *Solomon*, that *Peter*, with others that might be named, would have fallen so dreadfully, if they had sought the friendly advice of those who were not at the time under the power of the same temptations? But it is the device of Satan, to sow dissention among the professors of religion, that he may the more effectually accomplish his purposes. Go ask the backslider how he was induced to commit a sin, the very thought of which would once have made him shudder with horror. Perhaps at first it was suggested to him,
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that there is no occasion for so much strictness; he begins to neglect opportunities for meeting with his religious connections, though not without some uneasiness; the company of those, to whom he before appeared to be united by the strongest ties, is no longer desired; he feels himself like a stranger amongst them, has little or nothing to say, and even longs for the time of separation. He mixes with the world, where he meets with persons, who, by indirect hints and insinuations, are endeavouring to sap the foundations of virtue, and to expose religion to ridicule. Insensibly the temptation takes deeper root, the remonstrances of conscience are stifled, the avenues of redress are closed. At these seasons, when temptations thus present themselves to the mind, and are gradually relaxing its powers,—O for the warning, reproofing voice of a friend, to snatch from danger, and save from ruin! Instead of trusting to our own strength, should we not say, “Let the righteous smite me, it shall be a kindness; let him reprove me, it shall be like excellent oil, which shall not break my head.” Whilst Satan desires to have us, that he may sift us as wheat, should we not rejoice that Christ intercedes for us that our faith fail not, and also value the friendly admonitions of the saints?

Sin is of a most deceitful, enticing nature, it
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winds its course by such devious paths, that the unwary traveller is bewildered in the maze ere he is aware ; he knoweth not that death is there, and that the steps thereof lead down to the chambers of hell.

We have already observed to you, that in the early ages of the world, the posterity of *Seth* lived separate for a considerable time from the wicked descendants of *Cain*. But, as the sacred historian informs us, when men began to multiply upon the face of the earth, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair, and, notwithstanding their profligacy, they took them wives of all which they chose. Though at first they might shudder at the licentiousness of these ungodly persons, it soon became familiar to them; as they were united with them in family connection, they also adopted their vices. The consequence of which was, that they were all swept away with a common destruction.

Christian communion may also be considered *as pleasant in itself, and affording consolation in affliction.* Whatever the improper conduct of some professors of religion may suggest to the contrary, the communion of saints is the most pleasant of any kind of intercourse. We do not, we will not allow, that pleasure is only the attendant of the jovial throng, who are dancing in the eddies of life:

life; we maintain, on the contrary, that their fancied delights are all a delusion; they will not bear calm reflection; even in laughter the heart is sorrowful, and the end of that mirth is heaviness. But the society of which we are now speaking, affords the most sublime and rational pleasures. "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity." Friendship, thus cemented by religion, is the balm and the solace of life. It is the source of many delightful emotions, with which the secluded christian is unacquainted. In thus associating with good men, we find wisdom's ways to be ways of pleasantness, and all her paths peace. Love and joy beam upon the soul; God himself diffuses his graces all around; he commands his blessing, which is life for evermore, and by his favour puts gladness in the heart, more than the abundance of all created good. "Thy favour, O God! is life, thy loving-kindness is better than life!"

If destitute of those social feelings which we have been endeavouring to recommend, you lose a considerable part of the enjoyment public ordinances themselves were designed to afford.— Though you may present yourselves with the great congregation, you will feel like strangers amongst them. But the social christian delights in these
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exercifes, not only on account of what he hears, but for the fake of thofe with whom he unites. He there fees himfelf furrounded by his brethren, with whom he has often taken fweet counfel, who have wept with him in his sorrows, and rejoiced with him in his confolation. There he anticipates that blifsful period, when he, and thofe who are endeared to him by the tenderest ties, fhall join in nobler worship in heaven, when they fhall fit down with *Abraham*, *Ifaac* and *Jacob* in the kingdom of God.

Trials and diftreffes are the common lot of man. We are all travelling in a vale of sorrows, and have each of us our refpective burdens to bear; but one christian was not defigned to be independent of another. If we walk alone, we feel the whole weight of our calamities; by indulging gloomy reflections we magnify and become lefs able to bear them.; but 'tis friendship makes our burdens light. So far fhall we be from increafing our sorrows by fharing thofe of others, that, by the very attempt to relieve them, as well as by their fympathy with us, our own will be alleviated. When the foul is overwhelmed with diftrefs, how encouraging the affectionate prayers and condolence of fellow-christians ! But affliction falls with redoubled weight upon him who apprehends

hends that none careth for his soul, whose situation is like that of the Psalmist, " Lover and friend hast thou put far from me, and mine acquaintance into darknefs." We then stand in particular need of one to comfort us, and to stay our sinking spirits.

You cannot but recollect the remarkable words of the prophet *Malachi*, in a time of great discouragement; iniquity abounded, and God was evidently about to shower down his awful judgments on the Jewish people; " Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another, and the Lord hearkened and heard, and a book of remembrance was written for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name." Go you and do likewise. This will be the most effectual way of fortifying the mind, amidst domestic trials, and under public calamities.

Finally; Consider christian communion as a *preparative for the heavenly world*. If we have fellowship with God and his people on earth, it is evidential that we shall dwell with them for ever in glory. Heaven will be the consummation of what is begun on earth. Faith will there be changed into sight, hope into complete fruition; but love to God and his people shall continue through the countless ages of eternity.

The friendship of the world, however pleasing

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for the time, must inevitably be of short duration; if not interrupted by some untoward circumstance, which is often the case, death will certainly put a final period to it; and O, what language can describe the anguish of a final separation; to part, never, never more to meet! The very thought of it is enough to make the mind recoil with horror. Learn then to form such connections as will not only afford present gratification, but be most lasting in their duration. In this respect it must be allowed that the christian has incomparably the advantage of all others. We will not merely say that christian friendship is *more* permanent than any other; we assert it, and the conscience of the most hardened sinner must confirm the truth, that it is the *only* permanent one. It is not confined to the narrow bounds of mortal existence, it looks beyond death and the grave, to the period when it shall be ripened to perfection. With what composure, therefore, may the dying christian take leave of those, who, in this life, have been most endeared to him. 'I am about to be separated from you, but sorrow not as those that have no hope; we shall presently meet again, never more to part. I go to join the society of patriarchs and prophets; I shall there see my friends who are gone before me, and there we shall wait for your arrival.—

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There we shall review all the way that God has led us in the wilderness, to humble us, and prove us, and know what was in our hearts.' Such have often been the reflections of good men in the prospect of death.

Various figures are used in scripture, to set forth to our feeble conceptions the nature of the heavenly state, and its appropriate enjoyments. Most of them convey the idea, that the happiness of heaven will be heightened by the holy society of the innumerable company of angels, and of the spirits of just men made perfect. The inhabitants are called citizens; those that yet remain in the world are fellow-citizens with them. Saints on earth, and saints in heaven, all belong to the same family; this the apostle strongly intimates, when he says, speaking of Christ, "of whom the whole family in heaven and on earth is named." How exalted the character of all true christians! They belong, even whilst on earth, to the heavenly family. They are brought to Christ here, that they may be prepared for the pleasures and employments of a more exalted state of existence. Do you wish to realize and anticipate those pleasures and employments? associate with those whom you there hope to join. Be ye followers of them, who through faith and patience inherit the promises. The separation

is but flight; soon shall we quit these lower skies, to live the life of angels, (O transport) and of men!—Such are the advantages of christian communion. God grant that you may value them as you ought to do, and experience a growing acquaintance with them!

We shall now proceed, as was proposed, to mention some of *the means of promoting christian communion*. If, brethren, you are properly sensible of your obligations to this duty, and of the benefits that may be derived from it, you will consider this last part of our subject as peculiarly interesting.

Let us labour to have our minds impressed with a sense of the importance of religion. If you accustom yourselves to attend to it merely in a speculative, superficial manner, or if your hearts are divided between God and the world, it is not likely that you will have a proper value for the society of good men. Indifference to religion will manifest itself by indifference to the professors of it as such. You will, while in this state of mind, feel little or no regret at leaving the company of those, whose fervor of spirit condemns your own lukewarmness, and whose conversation turns principally on subjects in which you are not sufficiently interested. But if you are duly sensible of
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the worth of the soul, and the vast importance of religion, you will long for opportunities of social intercourse, and the concern you feel respecting your own best interests will awaken a solicitude respecting others. Such views of religion will have a tendency to detach the mind from the world at large, and to unite you in affection with those whose pursuits and enjoyments resemble your own. They will inspire a holy jealousy with respect to the cause of God in the world. For your brethren and companions' sakes, you will devoutly pray, that Zion may be favoured with peace and prosperity.

Study then the nature of christianity; you will thus learn its superior excellency, as comprehending all that is truly worthy the attention and pursuit of an immortal spirit. Should it not warm our hearts, and influence those of us who have experienced its power to cleave to one another with full purpose of mind!

The habitual neglect of christian communion is one of the strongest indications of a lukewarm spirit; but, on the contrary, if you continue steadfast in the doctrine of Christ, it will evidence itself by steadfastness in your fellowship with the saints.

*Let us pray, that the love of God may be shed
abroad*

abroad in our hearts. Wherever this exists it will not remain a latent principle in the breast, but will diffuse its influence all around. Though God himself will be the primary object of it, as the most amiable of all beings, it will extend itself to those who bear his image. If therefore you are saying, in the language of devout affection,—
“Whom have I in heaven but thee, and there is none upon earth I desire in comparison of thee!” you will, in the exercise of the same spirit, esteem the saints the excellent of the earth, and your delight will be in them. If you love him that begat, you will love those also that are begotten of him. Love to God is the life of christian communion; it is the most perfect bond that can unite our hearts together. Love humanizes the soul; it inspires generous and tender sentiments; it renders our duty pleasant; so that those exercises, which the formal, lifeless professor considers a tiresome task, are esteemed invaluable privileges.

Let us cultivate those tempers and dispositions which our divine Master exemplified, and which he enjoined upon his followers. Many of these, we have already seen, have respect to christians in their social capacity. Humility, in particular, ought to be diffused through the whole character. It is necessary to exercise it on so many occasions, that

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we ought to be clothed with it as with a garment.

Nothing can be more injurious to social religion than a proud, haughty spirit. Pride leads a man to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; it infatuates him to such a degree, as to fill him with the idea that he himself ought, on all occasions, to be gratified; but humility will draw off our attention from ourselves, and make us solicitous respecting the comfort and happiness of those with whom we are connected. Instead of dwelling upon the failings of others, it will teach us to study our own besetting sins, and we shall thus guard against those weaknesses which, in any degree, unfit us for communion with good men. O that more of this lowly spirit were evident amongst us! Were this the case, many of those breaches which take place in christian societies might quickly be healed.

The professors of religion are often deceived as to the motives of their conduct in withdrawing from the society of their fellow-christians. Plausible excuses are seldom wanting; but the ostensible reasons are often very different from those that really actuate the mind. Upon examination, shall we not frequently find, that the want of a humble spirit is the principal cause? Pride magnifies the most insignificant circumstances into grounds

grounds of offence. Matters in themselves the most trifling are considered as sufficient causes of separation; and thus the pleasures and advantages of christian communion are relinquished, for the gratification of this foolish passion. But the humble christian, rather than give offence to others, or occasion a breach of communion, will, where conscience is not concerned, be ready to make considerable sacrifices; sensible of the value of peace, he will seek and pursue it by all proper methods. Whilst in lowliness of mind he esteems others better than himself, he will *submit to them in the fear of God*. Humility is a virtue of such superlative excellence, that wherever it is found, a train of happy graces accompany it, and, in particular, that charity which suffereth long, and is kind, which envieth not, which seeketh not her own, and thinketh no evil. It is essential to the character of a disciple of Christ, and to the existence of christian communion. If our tempers are naturally irritable, it will restrain their impetuosity; if we are morose and austere, it will inspire meekness and gentleness; if we have been mistaken in any respect, this amiable spirit will induce us to make all proper concessions; or, if an offending brother manifest repentance, it will shew us that we ourselves are liable to be drawn aside,

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and that we are bound by the law of Christ to forgive him.

The ideas here suggested are plain, and perhaps some may think it unnecessary to insist so much upon them ; but, let it be remembered, that, where these dispositions are not found and evidenced, all attempts to promote christian communion will be ineffectual. Examine then what manner of spirit you are of. Study the example of our divine Lord and Master ; the more you resemble him, the more capable you will be of enjoying the pleasures of christian fellowship. Put off anger, wrath, malice, envy, and put on, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercy, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering : these are ornaments which are, in the sight of God, of great price.

Let us be diligent in attending to religious opportunities, whether of a public or more private nature. The public worship of God has, in all ages, been a happy means not only of converting the soul, but of uniting christians together. Their mingled vows, their joint supplications and praises have often made their communion sweet, so that they would have been willing even to become door-keepers in the house of God, rather than dwell in the tents of wickedness. The very idea of thus
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engaging unitedly in the exercises of religion is an endearing circumstance. But how do you injure your own souls, weaken the hands and discourage the hearts of others, by absenting yourselves, on trifling excuses, from these public ordinances! Every neglect in this way, unless absolute necessity require it, is a breach of christian fellowship, and is, in its consequences, highly prejudicial to the interests of religion; it argues indifference of mind both to the employment and the company. As you wish then to promote christian communion, dare not to absent yourselves from the public worship of God. "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhort one another daily, while it is called to-day."

The effect produced by public worship upon society in general, is greater than we are ready to apprehend. Without it there would be little even of the appearance of religion, much less of christian communion in the world. In a regular attendance on the means of grace, christians from distant places have opportunities of meeting with each other, which they could not otherwise enjoy. They unite together in the place where God has promised to manifest himself to them; they feel a mutual sympathy, and though they may not have

have an opportunity of expressing their sentiments, they often participate in each others emotions.

The ordinance of the Lord's supper is peculiarly adapted to promote union among christians. It was instituted by our blessed Saviour, just before the period of his last sufferings, when he was about to be separated from his disciples. No institution could have been better calculated to keep in our minds a grateful recollection of the love of Christ to us, and to inspire love to one another.

Hard must be the heart of that man, who can regularly attend to this ordinance, without feeling his affection for Christ and his people increased and confirmed. It is one of the most elevated acts of communion of which we are capable in this world. We here declare, that we believe in the same Saviour for the remission of sins, that we depend on the same promises, that we belong to the same family, that our hopes and wishes are the same; we consider it as a foretaste of that blissful period, when we hope to sit down together, and drink the wine new in our Father's kingdom.— Here our sense assists our faith, and brings eternal glories near.

It is evident from what the apostle *Paul* says concerning this ordinance, that he considered it as

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peculiarly congenial with the spirit of christian communion. "Let us therefore keep the feast, not with the old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

Social prayer likewise is useful in uniting the hearts of good men. When we assemble for this exercise, we intimate that we feel a regard not only for ourselves, but for others. We make each others requests and complaints, joys and sorrows, our own. We come to the divine throne as children to a common father; we ask mercies, not for ourselves only, but for others also; and in thus pleading for each other, we prove to ourselves and others, that we have communion together. Where meetings for prayer have been stately observed, they have generally been productive of much good. They have been a happy prelude to the revival of religion in the world. Animosities have thus been quelled, backsliders restored, the slothful roused, and the word of God has run and been glorified.

The societies which have lately been formed in this kingdom for the spread of the gospel at home and abroad, have been the happy means of promoting and extending christian communion. Many have, in this respect, expressed uncommon satisfaction

tion in them, and considered them as affording a present reward. These benevolent designs have a tendency to banish from the breast those dispositions which are most inimical to friendly intercourse, and to fire the soul with generous ardour and elevated sentiments. How much more worthy the attention of an immortal spirit are these pursuits, than those contentions which too often disturb the peace of christian societies, and bring discredit upon religion ! Let us not only pray that success may attend these laudable attempts, but also be willing, as far as lies in our power, to assist in this noble work. It is, christians, one way of expressing your love to Christ and his cause ; and you cannot engage in it, with proper motives, without feeling your love to each other confirmed.

Permit me, as another means of promoting christian communion, to recommend Mutual Confidence.—

Without a degree of this, there can be little satisfaction either in civil or religious society ; we shall neither be happy ourselves, nor shall we be able to endear ourselves to others. When the Psalmist *Asaph* was in so uncomfortable a state of mind, as to conclude “ that all men were liars,” he could have little or no satisfaction in society.

In early youth, while inexperienced in the ways of men, we are apt to expect too much from them ;

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we sometimes place our confidence upon improper objects, and are painfully deceived. These disappointments, which we meet with from mankind, should certainly teach us to be cautious; but when this caution is carried so far as to make us distrustful of every one, and to shut up the bowels of tenderness, it will imbitter life itself to us, and, in particular, incapacitate us for enjoying christian communion. If you give others reason to think that you place no confidence in them, you cannot, in return, expect to share their friendship. Whilst, therefore, you are careful to demean yourselves, so as not to dread a disclosure of your words and actions, let sincerity, uprightness and simplicity mark your conduct. The greatest deceivers must respect these virtues in others. "The lip of truth shall be established for ever, whilst a lying tongue is but for a moment." Let it be your concern to behave yourselves so in the sight of God and man, that you may be enabled to say, "This is our rejoicing, the testimony of our conscience, that, in simplicity and godly sincerity, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward."

Without that mutual confidence which we are now recommending, communion, either amongst men in general, or amongst christians, will be but an empty

empty name. If, by means of free communication, we are not acquainted, in some degree, with the situation of our fellow-christians, we shall not be able to feel that interest in their welfare which we otherwise should; we cannot pray for them so fervently, and so suitably; we cannot be so useful in warning or comforting, as the case requires.

Though, as christians, we ought not to place too much reliance on particular frames of mind, yet if we have laboured under the pressure of heavy trials, and afterwards found deliverance, should these instances of restoring mercy be passed by unnoticed? or if God is pleased to revive his work in our souls, and grant us peculiar consolation, shall we not acknowledge to others his goodness to us? Should we not, with the psalmist *David*, say, "Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will tell you what he hath done for my soul."

Of all the duties incumbent upon us, in our social connections, there is none perhaps more difficult than to give and receive reproof in a proper manner; yet it is an act of that confidence which we ought to exercise one towards another.

Are you called to this painful but necessary work, let it be done in the spirit of meekness. Tell your brother of his fault between you and him alone. Endeavour, by your manner, to convince

him, that you are influenced by a sincere regard for his welfare; that therefore he ought to receive it as an expression of your love. If you yourself are the object of reproof, be not hasty in imputing it to improper motives. Consider, that when given in a christian spirit, it is one of the greatest acts of kindness. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful."

Beware of giving way to suspicion, or listening to the base insinuations of whisperers and back-biters. They are deservedly ranked in scripture amongst the worst of mankind. There were, as it appears from several of the epistles, persons of this description in the primitive churches; and they have, in every succeeding age, been the instruments of Satan, in sowing animosity and dissention among christians. By such persons the most insignificant expressions or actions are misrepresented, and confidence is destroyed. Let it be your fixed determination, not to listen to their insinuations. Cherish a favourable opinion of others, till you have sufficient reason for the contrary; and receive not an accusation against a brother, unless you have undeniable evidence of its truth.

If we wish to maintain christian communion, we must shew mutual forbearance. In all our connections with mankind, whether civil or religious,
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this ought to be the case, otherwise they will not be of long duration. If we partake of the benefits of society, we should be willing also to submit to its established regulations; one of which is, *to bear, and forbear.* Where all have an equal right to think and act for themselves, it is unreasonable to expect, that every thing should be entirely conformable to our own views and dispositions.

Forbearance is necessary with respect to matters of *judgment* and *practice*. Our conceptions, on many subjects, are very confused. After all our researches, we must remain, in the present state, imperfectly acquainted with many sublime doctrines of religion; at best, we know but in part; we see, as through a glass, darkly. Difference of intellects and of education will have their influence, in causing diversity of sentiment. In religious societies there are generally some young, inexperienced christians; others of maturer age and experience; some of weak capacity; others of strong, manly sense; some who have little desire after an increase of knowledge, being governed by deep-rooted prejudices; others who feel a generous ardour after truth, and long to drink deeper into the mysteries of grace. It cannot reasonably be expected that the ideas of these different characters should exactly correspond. Though they may agree as to the essentials of christianity,

tianity, they will differ as to matters of less moment. Many attempts have been made, through successive ages, to enforce uniformity of sentiment, and implicit faith. Monarchs have exerted their temporal authority, and deluged the nations with blood, for no other end but this: popes have thundered out their ecclesiastical decrees; councils and synods have been assembled; casuists have laboured to build their own systems on the ruins of all others; they have fondly persuaded themselves that their arguments must strike conviction on every mind, and that none would again dare to oppose what they have established as truth; but all these efforts have proved ineffectual. *

As we cannot therefore all see alike, what method shall we adopt? Shall we wage perpetual war
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* The emperor Charles V. had been, in the former part of his life, a violent persecutor of the Protestants; he had laboured, by all the means in his power, to enforce an uniform system of belief amongst all his subjects. He resigned his crown towards the close of his life, and amused himself, in his retirement, with different branches of mechanics, and, among the rest, with clock-work. He used every expedient he could devise to make his clocks go exactly alike, but found it impossible. This led him to reflect, with a mixture of surprize and regret, on his own folly, in having bestowed so much time and labour on the more vain attempt of bringing mankind to a precise uniformity, concerning the mysterious doctrines of christianity.

about words to no profit? Shall we rashly censure all who do not, in every respect, come up to our own standard? Shall we arrogate to ourselves the claim of infallibility, and impose our consciences on other men? God forbid that we should manifest a spirit so opposite to the genius of christianity, and so subversive of christian communion! "Judge not that ye be not judged" is the command of our divine Master. Do not condemn with harshness; but, according to the apostolic exhortation, "*forbear one another in love.*" Learn to respect the rights of private judgment; that, where unity of opinion cannot be obtained, you may preserve the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

We are far from wishing to discourage a proper discussion of religious subjects; if carried on with temper and moderation, it is highly serviceable in dispelling the darkness of ignorance, and endears christians to one another; but whilst you are firm in your adherence to what you conceive to be truth, and honestly endeavour to convince others of their errors, be watchful over yourselves, lest you should lose sight of your first object, and by giving way to a spirit of contention, tear asunder the bonds of christian affection. We ought especially to treat the scrupulous consciences of our
brethren

brethren with tenderness and forbearance. "Him that is weak in the faith," says the apostle, "receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. Ye that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please yourselves." We cannot better enforce this than by the example of the apostle himself. He was ready to do his utmost, on all occasions, to engage the souls of men to Christ, and to promote harmony. He was willing to submit to any personal inconvenience to attain this end. Not only did he bear with the scrupulous, as to their own conduct, but he declared, that, rather than give offence, he would deny himself in what he deemed innocent.

But forbearance ought to be exercised not only with respect to differences in judgment; it is necessary in a practical view. It is a truth too plain to need any additional proof, that the best of men have many imperfections. As our knowledge is imperfect, so likewise are our graces; and though we ought not to connive at sin in our brethren, yet whilst we see them struggling with their besetting weaknesses, and endeavouring to overcome them, we should, knowing that we are also in the body, temper the severity of reproof by that charity which covereth a multitude of sins.

There

There are, in many societies of christians, persons of narrow, contracted minds, who set up their own outward deportment as the standard of propriety, and who claim the exclusive privilege of censuring all others. They mistake illiberal reflections for friendly admonitions. Without making any allowance for difference of situation or connections, they consider every deviation from their own manners as a criminal conformity to the world. Such persons may be entitled to that forbearance they refuse to others, so far as they have not had an opportunity of informing themselves better; but it would be well for them to examine into the genuine motives of their conduct, and to inquire whether the prevalence of such a spirit is not injurious to that communion which they are professedly endeavouring to promote.

Let us often look forward to the end of life, and endeavour to realize the glories of the invisible world. This will have a happy tendency to support our minds amidst the discouragements we meet with, arising from the imperfections we feel in ourselves, and see in others. How pleasing, how animating the thought, that, when we leave this world, sin will no longer embitter our social enjoyments! The work of sanctification will then be completed. The clearest discoveries of divine truth

truth will then beam upon the soul, and as the corruptions of our nature will be all done away, discord will for ever cease.

Finally, then, my brethren, be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace: and the God of love and peace shall be with you.—
Amen.



